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ABSTRACT

Debate can contribute to the solution of some of the problems of higher education but will thrive only to the extent that it can make a contribution to the greatest number of students and to society. Two areas that need improvement are topic selection and strategies of the negative team. Associations and national honorary societies schould promote off-topic debating by linking together several tournaments in order to focus on a single problem not chosen as the national topic. The use of "spread tactics" (attempting to cover more issues numerically than the affirmative will have time to answer in a five-minute rebuttal) is perceived as helpful by the average negative team but is harmful to debate as an activity. The simplest solution is to rearrange the time divisions in debate rounds and move the fifteen-minute negative block forward so that it follows the first affirmative speech rather than the second affirmative. This format would require that the affirmative team present its plan in its first speech. (EE)

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A RECONSIDERATION OF GOALS

by

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When Joe Torre holds out for $150,000, he has one thing going for him. Enough people will pay to see him play that money is available to meet his demand. The ability to hit a baseball is not vital to national security or anything else, nor does it have much carryover value beyond exercise you could just as well accomplish by doing sit-ups in your living room at no cost to anybody. Joe Torre will draw a good salary again next year because a lot of people will pay to watch him do what he does.

The last time I heard the final round at NDT, there were maybe a hundred people there, and it was free. Even debaters and their coaches have to be coerced into hearing a judging runoff rounds by withholding their ballots. Debate is never going to make it as a spectator sport.

Now golf and bowling prospered for years before television without very many spectators. They prospered because enough people participated to cover the high cost of bowling alleys and golf courses. Although the skills are worthless except as ends in themselves, people paid professionals to help them improve. These activities drew ample funds for their support, spectators or no spectators. The participants themselves supplied the money, because a lot of people liked the activity.

Debate would die if debaters had to pay tournament costs. Not very many people debate, even though somebody else pays the bill. Debate is not likely to become self-supporting, either through paid spectators or through massive participation, and that means our activity must be perceived by others as worth the money it costs, if it is to prosper.

Fortunately, we have something to sell. Higher education needs help. Colleges are under fire for massive irrelevance and narrow compartmentalization. We live in an age of rapid change, and what you learn in college may be obsolete before you graduate. You can't learn a set of facts that will carry you through life. And now there are a lot of unemployed college graduates around. We can no longer depend on a general reverence for degree holders to carry us through.

Consider the indictment Postman and Weingartner level at college eudcation in their book Teaching as a Subversive Activity. On p. 217 they conclude that

> Most criticism of the old education . . . makes the point that the students who endure it come out as passive, acquiescent, dogmatic, intolerant, authoritarian, inflexible, conservative personalities who desperately need to resist change in an effort to keep their illusion of certainty intact.

Debate is one of the few activities in higher education that can stand up to the challenge to demonstrate relevance to the real world and its problems. It will be the thesis of this paper that debate has much to contribute to the solution of the problems of higher education and of society, and that the activity will thrive and prosper to the extent that it will structure itself to make the maximum contribution to the greatest number of students, and to help society solve its problems, and that these goals should determine the shape of the activity.

Consider first the goals of higher education: a considerable body of criticism now suggests that higher education is too much content oriented. Students learn "facts" rather than processes that will prepare them to play roles in a changing world. They become oriented to a single answer printed in the back of the book rather than seeing alternatives, creating defensible interpretations, and making choices for themselves. Postman and Weingartner phrase the problem and their solution succinctly:

> One way of looking at the history of the human group is that it has been a continuing struggle against the veneration of "crap." Our intellectual history is a chronicle of the anguish and suffering of men who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions, and even

> outright lies . . . We have in mind a new education that would set out to cultivate . . . experts at "crap detecting."

What could be better for student-centered experience in "crap detecting" than having the opportunity to submit your ideas for scrutiny at a tournament, opposing students from other colleges who have devoted their time and energy to finding arguments to prove that your arguments and evidence are crap? Debate provides an ideal vehicle for educational experiences that are student-centered, problem-oriented, and interdisciplinary. It is also competitive, and competition motivates people to great effort, even when the activity is as meaningless as badminton or the 200 yard butterfly. If the stimulus of competition can drive people to great efforts in seeking defensible answers to society's most pressing problems, it makes a contribution to what ought to be central in education.

This philosophical matrix leads me to a consideration of two areas in which I believe we could increase the value of our activity to society: topic selection and our quaint customs on handling the fifteen minute negative bloc.

Because we have a topic that is clear, important, and debatable this year, it should be possible to talk about topic selection without implying criticism of those who have the thankless task of preparing the ballot for us each year. The problem is that we have asked them to do something that inherently limits the contribution we can make to the solution of problems: we have asked them to indicate a single problem that will absorb our attention for a full year. Debaters are trained to do something our society sorely needs: they are trained to find defensible solutions to problems. This should come in handy, and a lot of debaters become student senators, student body presidents, congressmen, and so on, after they <u>quit</u> debating. But one of my colleagues (who is a friend of debating) asked me one day whether there was any <u>output</u> resulting from all the <u>input</u> he saw on the topic. I couldn't think of any. Now there is nothing wrong with colleges teaching skills that can be put to use later. But there is also

nothing wrong with college students making a real contribution to the real world while they are still in college. And the present structure of our activity pretty much precludes that kind of contribution. Limiting ourselves to a single topic for a season limits our contribution in one way. A second thing that limits our contribution is our failure to achieve increasingly great depth of understanding after the first month or two of the season, but I will consider this under the heading of negative spread debating. And it is a sorry thing when outside agencies contact Stan Rives to obtain copies of the final round of NDT because they think that the end product of a year of student activity may contain something that would help them grapple with their real problems, and Stan has to send his regrets and say that if they are interested in the topic as it appears to the casual observer, then the debate will not have what they are looking for. Hopefully our championship rounds this year can make a contribution to the solution of critical national problems.

If we debated more topics, we could make a broader contribution to the solution of problems. Off-topic debating does not draw well because a single tournament is less appealing than an entire season on a topic for the devoted debater. We can form associations, or use our national honoraries, to promote off-topic debating by linking together several tournaments in order to focus on a single problem not chosen as the national topic (or one of them). NDT could establish this program very quickly by deciding to devote two of their preliminary rounds to a non-national topic. Such a topic could be announced at the beginning of the season, if we wished to focus attention on a particular subject, or decided later in the year on the basis of experience with particular resolutions, if we wished to promote interest in off-topic debating in general. A third possibility is the Protagoras-type tournament, in which information packets containing all the evidence admissible in the debates are made available to all the participants.

This plan gives more students the opportunity to debate, and gives debaters the opportunity to debate more topics, without the overwhelming research burden that orthodox debate requires. Clarion is hosting such a tournament this year, on the topic "Resolved: that further development of nuclear power for domestic energy should be prohibited." This tournament is being sponsored and funded by the Institute on Human Ecology of Northwestern Pennsylvania. They are interested in the question, and the contribution debate can make to thorough understanding of issues. We will have a division limited to persons who have not previously debated in high school or college tournaments, and a separate division for persons who have. We hope through this mechanism to raise the value of debate to our college and others by helping non-debaters to improve their skills, and by contributing our expertise to a problem area we would not otherwise study. If I may be allowed a brief commercial, we plan to hold this tournament on April 7, and you are welcome to attend for a total entry fee of $5.

Turn with me now, as they say, to my second (and final) point of analysis. I would like to urge both attitudinal and structural changes to deal with the problem of negative spread debating.

I hope you will excuse me if I make the topicality insanity of the last couple of seasons my springboard. From the easiest novice tournament to the finals of NDT, affirmative debaters pursued bizarre interpretations of the topic for a reason that makes very good sense: they hoped to win some of their affirmative rounds. Knowing they would encounter judge bias, teams still used cases that would alienate rather than meet a prepared negative. The squirrel case is risky, but a prepared negative is fatal. Coaches and debaters fear a good negative will beat an equally good affirmative every time. I suggest that this prevalent fear indicates a structural and/or attitudinal bias in our activity that we should take steps to counteract.

My point here is that "spread" tactics are perceived as helpful by the average negative team, but are harmful to debate as an activity, and that the activity should therefore act to make the tactic as undesirable to negatives as it is to debating.

If we are debating debatable questions (and I think we are) then the affirmative should expect to win about half the rounds. If affirmatives can't win because their position is less valid, less defensible, than the negative position, then we have exhausted a topic, found the proposed change untenable, and should be ready to move on to another issue. I submit, however, that our problem does not lie in the fact that the affirmative side of the resolution is untenable. The problem lies in the negative spread strategy. Debaters, judges, and coaches all think the spread works. Does the spread help us develop capable "crap detectors?" On the contrary, most negatives using the spread know they are using "crap," but know that five minutes of first affirmative rebuttal will not be sufficient to expose that crap for what it is and to resubstantiate the affirmative position. The affirmative is forced to develop their technique for sloughing arguments rather than answering them - time limits force them to fight crap with crap. Rebuttals ordinarily disintegrate into gibberish as four intelligent students try to cover more issues in five minutes than is humanly possible for a speaker - or a listener. Technique becomes paramount, overwhelms validity, and wins the round. The student who succeeds is the student who can effectively use crap, because the format does not allow for its exposure. Current strategy, then, is successful in undermining the proper goals of the activity.

Let us consider the impact of spread debating on our students' ability to solve problems. The last runoff round I heard before Christmas featured a common negative approach: the first negative speaker claimed all medical problems could be solved by expanding present programs to include more people, and dismissed an

affirmative argument that we were wasting $4.5 billion by claiming that "no harm had been shown to result." The second negative then gave his spread: we couldn't spend any more money on medicine without harming other priorities, and that we were short of doctors, that they were maldistributed, and so on and so on, completely destroying his partner's claim that it was feasible to expand present programs, and also indicating how crucial it probably was to save $4.5 billion worth of our scarce medical resources. The team was honestly stunned when they learned I had not voted for them, no doubt on the grounds that they had "spread the other team out of the room." (A value judgment at best) I submit that this common negative approach makes little or no contribution to our search for solutions to medical problems. The negative team is not searching for the appropriate medical delivery system, they are searching for more arguments (numerically) than the affirmative will have time to answer in a five minute rebuttal. Outside of debate, the time factor is not the critical one, but the structure of debate, our method of exploiting it, and our attitudes as judges, have elevated an arbitrary aspect of our activity to primary importance in determining wins and losses.

I need hardly comment on the effect on delivery. The ability to answer fifteen minutes of rapid fire "crap" in five minutes is of no use to anyone outside of tournament debating. That kind of delivery turns people off, stereotypes us as weird, and reduces or eliminates our ability to communicate with persons who are not debate coaches. The spread reduces the quality of analysis and renders communication impossible, but it wins debates, because we can read on ballot after ballot that the reason for decision was that the first affirmative didn't answer all the plan attacks, or didn't get back to the affirmative case.

Because this problem is a result of a structure and an attitude, it could be resolved by changing either, and I will urge you to consider both kinds of

changes. First, attitude. I will not be so hopelessly old fashioned as to suggest that judges downgrade speakers who talk so fast they can't be understood. I will leave that argument to disgruntled ex-coaches, and we all know they simply can't keep pace with modern progress. I will suggest, however, that an argument does not gain strength by virtue of being unanswered. It is no stronger than it was on first hearing, and if the function of judges is to judge, then the argument must be not only unanswered, but strong enough to justify a negative vote, or else the affirmative can safely ignore it for more important things. Carried to its extreme, this philosophy suggests that if the affirmative should win all the points it advances, and the negative win all the points it advances, the judge would have to decide which set of points was stronger, not simply vote negative because some negative argument stood. This idea can be coupled with an excellent suggestion made by Ralph Towne of Temple: Ralph suggested to me at a tournament earlier this year that the first affirmative rebuttalist be judged not on the basis of how completely he covered fifteen minutes of attack in five minutes, but on the basis of how effectively he used the five minutes at his disposal. This would give the affirmative the option of ignoring some or even all of the negative attack and inviting the judge to weigh the two positions. It would make it possible for first affirmatives to be coherent again. All it requires is an attitudinal change on the part of judges, an acceptance of the philosophy that they will not automatically vote against an affirmative because of failure to adopt a particular strategy, and instead weigh and judge the strength of the contending positions.

If this philosophy should become widespread, we might expect a magical change to come over our second negatives. They might quit using arguments that are mere time-wasters for their opposition, and try to concentrate on issues that are sufficiently important to justify a policy decision in the real world. Debate

could take a step toward reality, intelligibility, and the outer world it depends on for its existence.

However, so many urgent problems remain unsolved in our society despite the fact that an attitudinal change could solve them, that I am unwilling to rest with that optimistic suggestion. Since we can't realistically guarantee widespread attitude change, let us consider the possibility of structural changes that will have a beneficial effect on negative spread tactics.

We can deal with the spread by rearranging the time divisions in our debate rounds, and we should experiment with methods of doing so. The simplest method is to move the 15 minute negative block forward, so that it follows the first affirmative speech rather than the second affirmative. This format requires only one rule to be workable: that the affirmative must present their plan in the first affirmative speech. Make the second negative introduce his plan attack early, and give him just five minutes to do it. This will force him to focus on his most important issues, and give the affirmative ample time to reply. All speeches after the first 25 minutes become rebuttals, in which positions can be explored in more depth, and their will be less justification for affirmative teams to slough key plan issues. The format, then, would be:

First Affirmative	- 10 minutes
First Negative	- 10 minutes
Second Negative	- 5 minutes
Second Affirmative	- 10 minutes
Second Negative	- 10 minutes
First Affirmative	- 5 minutes
First Negative	- 5 minutes
Second Affirmative	- 5 minutes

If debators and coaches would exercise the same kind and amount of ingenuity on improving the debate format that they used in seasons past in thinking up new interpretations of the topic, I am sure they would devise a number of promising alternatives, and I would urge them to direct their energies in that manner.

It has become fashionable in an age of crisis for speakers and writers to claim that if their suggestions are not followed civilization will be destroyed and mankind wiped off the face of the earth. This practice has become so common that several first negatives I have heard have essentially taken the position that anything less than the total destruction of our species was an insufficient warrant for action. I can only hope that my listeners are somewhat less crisis-oriented, and would be inclined to do something if they thought they saw an opportunity to increase the value of debate to those who participate, and to the society that pays the bills. On that modest note I rest my case.